**Good S’PORE SERVICE (Really?)**

By Tessa Wong & Lee Pei Qi

MANY Singaporeans are surprised that the country has scored nearly seven out of 10 in the first national customer-satisfaction survey, which is being taken as an indicator of service standards here.

Those who took part in a Straits Times straw poll generally conceded that service standards have risen, but said they would give it only a passing grade.

In the poll of 50 locals aged 15 to 69 from all walks of life, 34 said they would award 50 points or below, out of 100.

Among the 50 polled, 42 said nearly seven out of 10 was clearly too high.

Most griped about sales assistants’ lack of product knowledge, even though some had nice things to say about those who went the extra mile.

Accountant Chia Kok Hsiang, 39, for example, was pleasantly surprised to be offered two free drinks at a fast-food restaurant last weekend, after he carelessly spilled his own.

He said: “The staff there were not at all upset and they were very efficient in helping me clean up my mess.”

The Customer Satisfaction Index, released by the Institute of Service Excellence (ISE) at the Singapore Management University, gave Singapore an overall score of 68.7 out of 100; in parallel polls abroad, the United States scored 75, and South Korea, 72.

The survey here, the results of which were released on Monday, polled over 12,000 people, both Singaporeans and tourists, on the service they received across sectors, from telecommunications to transport.

Respondents had to rate various aspects of their experience – from the way they were served to how complaints were handled – on a scale from 1 to 10.

ISE’s survey, the first one to give a holistic picture of customer satisfaction here, will be conducted annually henceforth.

Going by ST’s straw poll to gauge reactions to the ISE study, bad customer experience seems to cluster in food and beverage outlets, taxis and retail shops.

One common gripe: Service staff here need to be more familiar with what they are selling.

**UNHELPFUL**

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**A DIFFERENT STORY**

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Administrative executive Nooraliza Rahim, 28, said: “It is very frustrating when you ask waiters about their menu and they just give you dazed looks. It is as if they are not sincere in serving you at all.”

Bad attitude, ranging from rudeness to lack of initiative, also riled some respondents.

Student Gordon Tan, 23, said he met a rude cabby two months ago who took his family problems out on his passenger, a complete stranger.

Burtly shop assistants get the goat of housewife Sheryl Teo, 52: “I was in the fitting room a couple of weeks ago, trying on a blouse and I needed help to try on a medium-size one. But the sales assistant just gave me a sour face and ignored me.”

**SURPRISE**

Knight Frank’s director of retail Danny Yeo said such lapses in service are not surprising, given that the industry is plagued by a staff shortage and a high turnover.

The staffing crunch has led businesses – in particular, retail ones – to hire part-timers and school-leavers. With the high turnover, spending on training takes a back seat, since bosses expect their staff to quit soon anyway, said Mr Yeo.

However, some of those surveyed told ST that service standards here were not a lost cause.

Teacher Winston Goh, 46, said: “I don’t think service staff even smile at you in the past. Now, some shops are open to even greeting you and it really makes one feel welcome.”

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